

Taking stock of our local heritage

Historical preservationists tallying to save community assets

By Alexander Reid
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Kingston's Surprise Hose Company, built in late 1800s, was a rundown, dilapidated building until a group of volunteers, over 15 years, restored the decrepit firehouse to its past glory.

Now, local historians are wondering just how many other historical properties in Kingston are worth saving. A survey to provide some answers, commissioned last year by Town Meeting, is under way and has already identified more than 50 properties, some dating to colonial times.

Gordon Massingham, chairman of the Kingston Historical Society, said the pursuit has been fueled by fears that the town will be overrun with development.

"The land is being grabbed up at a rapid rate," said Massingham. "Once the available open land is gone, the developers will look at the old buildings and tear them down to put up new ones. And Kingston has a great deal that is worth saving." Massingham estimated that Kingston, a precinct of Plymouth before separating into a town in 1726, has about 325 properties with historic value that merit preserving.

As with Kingston, land speculation and intense development have spurred a protectionist spirit throughout the region, where assorted efforts are flourishing to catalog and find ways to hang onto pieces of the past.

These efforts are often done on a shoestring, but some support comes through fund-raising activities of historical groups, appropriations from town budgets, and grants from state and federal preservation agencies.

The preservation spirit is alive in Randolph, where there

are plans to demolish several old buildings, including some built in the 1800s, to make way for a new Walgreens drug store and a CVS pharmacy on North Main Street.

Randolph resident Henry Cooke IV, chairman of the town's Historical Commission, said his group will seek the designation of North Main Street, from West to Orchard streets, as an historic district. It would be Randolph's first.

"We're trying to save a little of the town from the modern

strip mall architecture that really has no character," said Cooke, a Randolph native.

Massachusetts is saturated with towns that trace their origins to Colonial America. Many towns cultivate these connections as if they were pedigrees.

Historians in Hingham, for instance, are proud to point out that its Lincoln National Historic District boasts the largest number of contiguous 17th-, 18th- and 19th-century buildings in the country and also contains two national landmarks at the Old Ship Meetinghouse, still in use as a church, and the Benjamin Lincoln House, honoring the Revolutionary War hero.

Today, more towns are bracing for another round of residential and commercial development, bound to accelerate once Old Colony commuter rail service starts in a few weeks.

And even communities with more modest architectural legacies are seeing the perils to their historic landmarks.

"When people think of historic towns they don't think of Rockland, but we do have some history here," said Mary Jo Tanzi, a lifelong Rockland resident who is researching town archives in hopes of obtaining historic district recognition for the north end of Union Street from the National Register of Historic places.

Tanzi and other members of Rockland's Historic Commission



The Nathaniel Winsor House in Duxbury

Communities taking stock of local heritage

■ PRESERVATION

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sion said the area contains more than two dozen homes built in the 1800s for families who once ran the city's prosperous shoe industry.

A group of Hanson residents also are compiling a list of properties to submit to the state Historical Commission for a National Register listing.

Judith McDonough, executive director of the Massachusetts Historical Commission said that historic character is one element that distinguishes one community from another.

"For some people, it's why they move to a particular town," said McDonough. "It's getting more priority now because there's so much growth. Where there is so much growth there is concern about holding onto what makes a town special."

That's why more communities are struggling with the lack of protection for their historic properties.

Duxbury, which was settled by Plymouth Pilgrimage families, boasts more than 250 historic properties,

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GORDON MASSINGHAM, *chairman, Kingston Historical Society*

including the King Caesar House, built by shipping magnate Ezra Weston. But the town has no historic district or any other designation that would regulate how a property owner treats his historic treasure.

Other historical designations, like the National Register, are honorary and do not restrict owners from changing the design, architecture, or color of buildings.

As a result, the town wields no power over owners of historic properties to follow original designs, said Marsha Solberg, director of the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society.

Solberg said she and others are worried about the fate of the Na-

thaniel Winsor House on Washington Street. The house, built in the early 1800s, has been on the market for several months.

"The fear is that it could be sold to someone who's not interested in maintaining the historical integrity or who might want to tear it down," Solberg said.

The Historical Society plans to propose a demolition delay bylaw at the annual Town Meeting in March. Solberg said such a bylaw would impose a six-month waiting period before a structure deemed historic could be torn down in order to give the society and town officials notice of an impending demolition. "It

would give us a chance to talk to the owner and let them know how historic these properties are so that they might think twice before razing a building," Solberg said.

Massingham said the Kingston commission has not decided to pursue a historical district designation for any area in town. He said there are more than a dozen properties for which listings in the National Register will be sought to draw attention to the town's heritage.

"People will take a great deal of pride in the rural and historic character of the town," Massingham said. "The goal now is to make people more aware of Kingston's heritage before it's knocked down or paved over."

Communities such as Randolph, meanwhile, have similar motives. By preserving historic artifacts, these towns are able to retain their local identities, he said.

"They give us a sense of something familiar and friendly to anchor to," said Coeke. "In some ways, this is very comforting to people."



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / DAVID L. RYAN

Marsha Solberg, Duxbury Rural and Historical Society director, stands in front of King Caesar House, one of town's many historic properties.